Norwegian Rural Vigilantism during COVID-19: Self-Protection against a Perceived Urban Threat

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Abstract

When private citizens mobilise to protect their local community against threats, the rationale is that the local government is unable or unwilling to do so, due to legal restrictions, a lack of organisational resources and capacity – or indifference and discrimination. While these practises are commonly theorised as vigilantism, this conceptual approach draws in large part on studies of urban parts of the United States, Latin/South America, and the Commonwealth countries. This corresponds to a parallel knowledge gap in rural criminology, where there is little knowledge of so-called peripheral areas in the global north as well as a dearth of theoretical conceptualisation about rural vigilantism, and few studies cover areas outside the Anglo-American context. Drawing on qualitative fieldwork in 2020, this paper contributes to knowledge of vigilantism in the Nordics by providing a study on how Norwegian citizens mobilised to protect local communities from an urban pandemic threat, constituting a new form of rural vigilantism.

Keywords: COVID-19; informal policing; high trust societies; social unrest; crisis communication; Norway

> If you're being threatened and you call the police, they take three days to arrive. But shoot a wolf, and they come right away! – Resident in the inlands, Norway.

The outbreak of COVID-19 tested critical emergency infrastructures worldwide. Overloaded health care systems and rising unemployment, death and illness rates were challenges that most – if not all – countries faced in 2020, during the first wave of the pandemic. In some nations, economic instabilities caused by the pandemic gave rise to socio-political unrest, as governments struggled to protect the lives and livelihoods of citizens, and particularly the already marginalised communities (Comolli, 2022; Menton et al. 2020; Reininger et al. 2022). The pandemic management policy in the Nordic "high trust societies" (Hedenigg, 2021) was on the one hand largely trust-based (Saunes et al. 2021), where some measures (e.g. social distancing, curfews) were soft law recommendations. On the other hand, most Nordic governments enforced longer periods of mandatory lockdowns and closures of schools and industry. The Nordic pandemic management policy was thus two-fold throughout the pandemic: partially trust-based, and partially force.

The population in Norway, as in other Nordic nations, is comparatively small and spread across a large and vast geography. People commonly reside in primary homes in urban areas while owning secondary homes – vacation homes, holiday houses or *cabins* – in rural areas. Socially distancing at rural, private properties was a valuable asset for preventing a rapid spread of the COVID-19 virus at the start of the pandemic, along with other pre-existing conditions of the Norwegian welfare state, such as universal health coverage (Saunes et al. 2021); frequent governmental crisis communication and strategic diplomacy (Falkheimer and Raknes, 2022); track-and-trace systems for measuring social distancing (Sandvik, 2020), and access to medical equipment and capacities for testing, treatment and isolation (Baniamin et al., 2020). The measures were not found to affect the overall "high trust" in authorities to any notable degree (Helsingen et al. 2020).

However, resources are not equally distributed within the nation. Norwegian health service resources are distributed to individual municipalities based on how many residents reside there as their *primary* place of residence. The idea is that people are more likely to need health assistance where they "live". Subsequently, as more people primarily reside in urban areas, the urban municipalities receive funding even if people become unwell at their rural vacation home. Rural health services are not dimensioned for assisting urban visitors – a concern explicitly expressed by local municipality administrations at the start of the pandemic (Andresen and Mogen, 2020). In order to protect rural health services from an overload of urban patients, the Norwegian government issued an emergency bill prohibiting overnight stays at secondary homes in other municipalities in March 2020 (Helse- og omsorgsdepartementet, 2020). This study looks at breaches of the ban – why they occurred and how rural residents responded, and discusses them as expressions of political tensions between rural and urban populations in shared, rural spaces.

While much research interprets pandemic "success" by mortality and illness rates, a focus on the local, socio-political and *lived* realities of the pandemic tells a different tale of the COVID-19 pandemic. This is particularly evident when tracing how the pandemic amplified pre-existing tensions in shared urban and rural spaces in the "high trust society" of Norway. The aim of this paper is to provide a discussion of how the Nordic pandemic management policy contributed to a growth of informal policing in rural Norway. This is achieved by contributing an empirical study of pandemic conflicts that occurred between rural residents and urban visitors in four Norwegian municipalities at the start of the COVID-

19 pandemic. The paper suggests that this case study can nuance existing scholarship on informal policing, or vigilantism. It develops a three-part explanatory framework to make sense of the mobilisation, arguing (1) that political, social and professional roles overlap and intersect to a larger extent in rural than in urban areas, (2) that crisis communication, while exhibiting well-known attributes of speed and distribution, is inherently local and must be understood in the context of overlapping roles and the 'reading' by community members: e.g., everybody interprets the social media activity of the mayor's partner in a particular way, and (3) that this must be understood as a form of vigilantism that is contingent on cultural and socio-political dynamics.

Theoretical Background

Previous Research on Vigilantism and Rural Policy in the Nordics

Informal policing, or vigilantism, includes the six elements by Johnston (1996): planning, premeditation, organisation, private voluntary agency, autonomous citizenship (participation), and threat or use of force. Vigilantes offer protection of local resources by proposing alternative models of policing, and can take on the traits of formal law enforcement, such as wearing uniforms and selecting public spokespeople. The perceived lack of protection may further result from a dearth of organisational resources and capacity at the official (national, state, county) administrative level – or indifference and discrimination, all of which are by the events described in this paper. Vigilante formations in rural areas thus occupy an organisational void, are welcomed in some communities and cause further polarisation in others. While a framework of vigilantism assists in analysing the developments described in the paper, the framework lacks nuance to account for rural and pandemic contexts. The paper therefore develops an exploratory framework for rural vigilantism, and suggests that it is not from a *subaltern* experience that these formations appear, but rather from a *superior* stance – one of power in unity and the (re)gaining of authority in an autochthone space.

Nordic researchers have argued that centralisation of resources contributes to a sense of deprivation outside of cities and metropolitan areas, as rural residents 'no longer expect for the government to listen to rural interests and act in ways that benefit these areas' (Eidheim & Fimreite, 2020, p. 9, see also Ceccato, 2015; Larsson, 2020). This idea is in line with the concept of the rural subaltern experience (Skogen and Krange, 2020), which takes the subjective realities of rural/urban power dynamics as its point of departure to explain rural resistance and dissent towards urban visitors.

Some scholarship separates between (vigilantist) crime control and social control, arguing for a distinction between modes of initiatives – that vigilante formations must be understood as controlling crimes committed by others, or as controlling social deviance (Johnston, 1996). They may control and sanction similarly to that of policing, and may also control and sanction acts that do not fall under a penal code. Vigilantism as productive of morality is also an understanding adopted from Buur and Jensen, who argue that '[t]he concept of crime, used locally, is profoundly polyvalent' (2004, p. 147), meaning that vigilantes may also control acts that are legal, but in breach of (local) moral codes. The Norwegian protestant heritage favours frugality, restraint and selflessness – a social control concept referred to as Janteloven in Nordic culture (Avant and Knutsen, 1993). Secondary (luxury) home ownership is from an ideological stance in breach of that moral code. Norway is thus at a conjuncture of national identity, in which history and shared cultural identity

favours frugality, while contemporary wealth favours luxury, leisure and comfort. These identities are especially visible in cabin areas, where residents live and work, and visitors go on holiday.

Norwegian Resource Conflicts Prior to the COVID-19 Pandemic

An uneven allocation of emergency resources can lead to dramatic outcomes in times of crisis. Norway is a long, vast and mountainous country. For example, a drive through the Northern part of Norway, where 10% of the population resides, will take 24 hours. Small residential areas are scattered across a diverse geography. Of Norway's 990 towns, 746 towns have less than 2000 residents and 338 towns have less than 500 (Statistisk sentralbyrå, 2019). It is thus imperative that critical emergency services are available and have the resources to act quickly in various kinds of geographical space. While many, if not most towns in Norway have historically had access to services such as law enforcement, health services, schools, courts and detention facilities, recent and ongoing reorganisation efforts favouring centralisation is changing how rural residents are able to access these services. Three key resource conflicts sit at the core of these developments: threats to protection (police and courts), threats to survival (health care services), and threats to land (space and environmental resources).

Changes to Protection, Survival and Land

A nation-wide police centralisation and reform was implemented in 2016. The reform followed a 2013 public inquiry report criticising police efficiency, slow response time and uneven competence levels within and across law enforcement departments. Rural police forces have long been scrutinised for lacking specialisation – most evident in the 22 July 2011 terror attack on Utøya Island. Poor decision making by police forces in several municipalities allowed the perpetrator to stay on the island for more than an hour, indirectly contributing to the murders of 69 people, most of whom were children. While the police force was heavily criticised for lacking direction, resources, hierarchy and communications in the following investigation (22 July Commission, 2012), the local police force in Northern Buskerud, where Utøya Island is located, was found to be particularly underprepared. For example, only a single person staffed the Northern Buskerud operation communications centre on 22 July 2011 (Renå, 2022). Findings from the official inquiry into police conduct during the attack re-ignited the public debate on police preparedness in rural Norway, and contributed to the pro-specialisation and pro-centralisation argument.

Later, investigators in the 2013 public inquiry expressed concerns that 'de-centralised structures with strong local autonomy fail to meet the requirements of specialised professional environments or use of technology according to current developments in crime and society' (Justis-og beredskapsdepartementet, 2013: 17). The report recommended two necessary changes to nation-wide policing: changes to structure and quality. Reorganising hierarchies and strategically redistributing resources would improve preparedness within the force, as 'hierarchy, centralization and standardization [is] central to create a robust police force' (Granér, 2017, see also Christensen et al. 2017). A centralised force would communicate better, get to the scene quicker and provide a more standardised service, and be centred around the more densely populated areas. This is part of the narrative that "real policing" belongs in metropolitan areas where "real crime" happens, and consequently that policing rural residents is not for their protection, but at their expense (Larsson, 2020).

The health care system has undergone changes parallel to changes in the police. Some specialist services, such as emergency surgery and maternity wards have moved to regional centres (see Helse Møre og Romsdal, 2022), supported by the same arguments as in other centralisation debates; The cost of treating patients is higher in rural areas, and all citizens will benefit from more specialised and centralised health services. Additionally, a reform restructuring the Norwegian courts system is currently in planning, with the aim of reducing the number of court districts from 60 to 22. The reform will not close current courts in rural areas but streamline and centralise decision-making powers to be 'sufficiently robust for the future' (Justis-og beredskapsdepartementet, 2020: 351).

By 2016, 27 police districts were reduced to 12 and 339 police stations were reduced to 121. Several rural sheriff stations (*lensmannskontor*) were combined and relocated to regional centres. These decisions caused protests in local communities where local police presence was lost.

The Cabin at a Conjunction of Crisis Management

Norway – its population small relative to other European and Western states and with easily accessible welfare services – went into the first round of social distancing maintaining a high level of trust in government and health services (Helsingen et al. 2020). As schools, kindergartens and workplaces closed, many Norwegians could continue working from home. The Norwegian state was quick to issue advance unemployment benefits to anyone unable to work due to social distancing restrictions. However, as the virus was spreading within Norwegian metropolitan areas in the middle of March 2020, and corresponding to travel restrictions imposed by comparable and neighbouring nation states, the Norwegian government introduced a special proxy law that would alter pandemic management conditions. The proxy law provided the government with the tools to enforce additional temporary laws and sanctions without consulting the Courts. Notably, the proxy law had been written in secret, without judicial oversight (Graver, 2020). The media and the public were only informed hours before the new legal capacities of the government went into effect (Mæland, 2020).

Founded in the powers of the proxy law, the Norwegian government further introduced the COVID-19 Emergency Bill, which the Norwegian Prime Minister described as 'the most intrusive measures Norway has had in peacetime' (Statsministerens kontor, 2020). The aim of the bill was to limit the spread of the virus by regulating mobility. It prohibited overnight stays outside of officially registered home municipalities in March and April 2020, which meant few people would have access to privately owned cabins and holiday homes (Helse-og omsorgsdepartementet, 2020). Colloquially, the bill was dubbed "the cabin ban". Breaches of the ban were sanctioned with fines of 20,000 NOK (approx. 2300 USD) and up to 6 months prison. However, despite the threat of prosecution and criminal liability, the ban had limited effect as many urban residents nonetheless travelled to rural cabin areas to escape the rapid spreading of the virus (Tønset et al. 2020; Vestad, 2021b). An area in Eastern Norway, where 21.000 people reside, registered 55.000 mobile phones in the area the first weekend of the ban, and local politicians desperately urged cabin owners to 'please go back home! Only then can we control the virus' (Brekke, 2020).

One town with 2500 residents requested assistance from the police in keeping 25.000 cabin owners from accessing the area (Tønset et al. 2020). Law enforcement and military personnel were mobilised to aid in controlling cars and cabins for unwanted visitors (NRK,

2020). Several municipality administrations sent text messages to all property-owning non-residents, while others sent automated messages to all mobile phones within the local network coverage. By doing the latter, they were able to count the number of message recipients, and obtain precise numbers of how many mobile phones were in the area (Smetbak, 2022). National news broadcasters ran stories about frustrated residents, next to images of cars queueing up towards snowy mountains (NRK Dagsrevyen, 2020). Registration plate details revealed that many of the cars driving through or towards rural towns had originated elsewhere (Vestad, 2021a).

Norway was not the only country to impose national travel restrictions, nor the only country to experience unwarranted mass mobility to the countryside at the start of the pandemic. Residents in Spanish (and& Cañas, 2020), Indian (Kumar, 2020), and English towns (Murphy, 2020) set up roadblocks to become inaccessible from the outside. However, important to the Norwegian context is the cultural meaning of secondary home ownership. It is common for upper and middle class urban residents to own secondary properties in rural areas (Statistisk sentralbyrå, 2022b). Secondary home ownership is also often thought to be a privilege of the wealthy and the powerful, since becoming a common upper- and middle-class asset after the oil boom in the 1970s (Helgerud, 2021). Today, an estimated 40% of the Norwegian population has access to one or more of the 440.000 privately owned cabins in the country, and 4000-7000 new cabins are built every year (Statistisk sentralbyrå, 2021, 2022a). Thus, those who breached the ban can be said to generally be of a specific socioeconomic class.

The cabin ban was introduced just prior to Easter, which is high season for tourism in mountain towns with ski resorts. Cabin tourism is a major source of income for many towns in Norway – some towns have more than five cabins per local resident – which contributes to a continuing need for tourism and stresses social bonds between locals and visitors (Farstad, 2011). By prohibiting overnight stays and practically ending the financial flows generated by tourism, a substantial part of the expected income in many Norwegian towns came to a very sudden halt.

Paradoxically, yet importantly, rural areas are also critical to Norwegian emergency infrastructure, for example with respect to emergency water supply and wartime sheltering (Helgerud, 2021). Secondary properties in rural areas have historically provided shelter for urban and metropolitan residents in times of socioeconomic and political uncertainty (ibid.). At the same time, emergency infrastructures in rural towns are not equipped to handle large-scale crises. The Norwegian state allocates health care resources and funding to each municipality based on its number of registered residents. Municipalities receive no additional funding for cabin owners or tourists – an issue which frequently up for debate in budget evaluations (see Ellingsen, Hodne and Sørheim, 2010. English summary on page 10).

The sustainability of cabin construction are also part of national political debate on urban exploitation of rural resources, as it speaks to the increased demand for cabins in rural areas, and the (rural) concern with its consequences for local nature (see Almås and Fuglestad, 2020). Residents (Kaste, 2021), local governments and the state (Norwegian Ministry of the Environment, 2012) stress that continued cabin construction exploits natural resources in rural areas. Heating of the ground leads to warmer waters and threatens fish, animals and livestock. Increased human presence and activity such as charging electric cars further stresses the local environment. Some companies in charge of cabin construction have

also been investigated for human trafficking and exploitation of foreign workers, who work under harsh conditions for little or no pay for extended periods of time (Thorenfeldt and Hagesæther, 2022). The police and tax authorities are actively trying to prevent tax evasion and fraud in the imported cabin construction industry (Skatteetaten, n.d.).

The cabin and second-home tourism are in many ways objects of tension. Still, secondary homes in rural areas are a tenet to Norwegian history and shared cultural identity (Bratrud and Lien, 2021) and it is thus a complex and multifaceted object of knowledge. The cabin is part of "what it means" to be Norwegian. It is steeped in tradition, associated with generational ties, solitude and tranquillity, and is important for the history of the country. Today, as before, cabins provide protection from the dangers of the wider world and 'many people in Norway seek towards their cabins when the rest of the world feels unsafe' (*TOSLO-2020-176591*, 2021).

Data and Methodology

The paper draws on self-reported interview data collected between June and September 2020 – shortly after the cabin ban was lifted. Seven cabin owners and five local residents were interviewed for the study. In order to ensure a local resident demographic familiar with cabin owners, all participants had connections to municipalities with an equal or higher number of cabins relative to the number of registered residents. The distribution of cabins and residents in a municipality was confirmed using the databases of Statistics Norway *(Statistisk sentralbyrå)* (see Statistisk sentralbyrå, 2022b, date reflects last updated). The overall gender demographic of the participants this study was evenly divided at 6 men and 6 women. Furthermore, most participants were aged 50 or older, which reflects the general age of cabin owners in Norway (Statistisk sentralbyrå, 2016). Two participants were younger than 35.

Due to the ongoing pandemic, both recruitment and interviews were in large part conducted online. First, email was used to recruit four participants. I reached out to 10 public officials in rural municipalities, of which four confirmed their intentions to participate. These four participants had political positions in their respective municipalities, and were part of the local crisis management groups during the first phase of the pandemic. Their political affiliation meant they had intimate knowledge of the local operationalisation of the cabin ban and could provide insights into both the bureaucratic processes and societal insights about the local community, as they are also residents. Once these four had confirmed their intentions to participate, I used Facebook to recruit five participants with connections to the same municipalities as the first four respondents. Posts advertising the project were posted in in cabin ownership groups and local resident groups for individual towns. Later, two more participants were recruited through the snowball sampling method. Apart from the initial four respondents, no other participant had political affiliations. The remaining participants were residents or cabin owners who had been present in the four municipalities during the ban.

11 of 12 participants were interviewed online using the video call software Zoom. The final 12th participant was interviewed in person as social distancing restrictions in Oslo, Norway, temporarily lifted in the fall of 2020. Video call interviews allowed for data collection at times and places suiting the schedules of each participant: Those who were interviewed online were located at their cabins, offices, homes offices, and in cars. Several of the cabin owners were at their cabins during the interview session, which allowed them to show on camera where they were during the ban. Two participants were driving through the

cabin district during the interview session, which also allowed them to show locations relevant to their experiences. In addition to allowing for privacy during our conversations, the video call interviews were efficient in terms of time, as there are great distances between the towns included in this study. Prior to the pandemic, little qualitative methodological theory spoke in favour of digital or online data collection. This has changed significantly since the pandemic, and experiences from this project attest to and support current trends in pandemic fieldwork (Lupton, 2021).

The analysis embedded a thematic framework (Braun and Clarke, 2006), meaning that the interview data was first categorised into broader and then more specific sub-themes in order to identify patterns within the data set. Descriptions of events and observations were first sorted chronologically using the software NVivo, so that the overarching codes were (1) before the ban, (2) during the ban, and (3) after the ban. Drawing on the data within the three overarching codes, additional sub-codes were created to collect thematically similar descriptions. The sub-codes included but were not limited to (1.1) perceptions of the relationships between residents and cabin owners before the ban, (2.1) their own actions during the ban, (2.2) observed actions of others during the ban, (2.3) communications with opposite group during the ban, (3.1) reflections about legitimacy of the ban, and (3.2) relationships between groups after the ban. The primary benefit of embedding a thematic framework for analysis is capturing 'some level of *patterned* response or meaning within the data set' (Braun and Clarke, 2006: 82), which was achieved here by beginning with overarching categories before searching for reoccurring themes within and across the data material.

Interviewing cabin owners for this study meant that the cabin owners who responded to the study admitted to breaching the ban. That offence carried sanctions of fines and up to six months prison at the time (Helse- og omsorgsdepartementet, 2020). Protecting their anonymity has therefore been of significant importance during and after the initial data collection phase. Measures to ensure protection of identity included storing interview data on encrypted hard drives, anonymising names and places during interview transcription, permanently deleting audio recordings and providing aliases in later publications. The specific towns this study covers are omitted from publications in order to ensure a protection of the identity of the participants. This data protection plan was approved by the Norwegian Centre for Research Data (NSD) under project number 384571.

Results

As the COVID-19 pandemic became reality in Norway in March 2020 and despite "the cabin ban" having been introduced, some rural areas experienced high numbers of cabin visitors. "Cabin municipalities" *(hyttekommuner)*, meaning towns with high number of cabins and cabin tourism, requested assistance from the police and army in managing the situation. The following section draws on interview data from four such municipalities to illustrate how the police were the first body of authorities to be relied upon for assistance. As is later shown, the lack of police resources for this purpose in rural Norway meant the responsibility of acting as police was moved to members of the local municipal administrations. In turn, their lack of power or willingness to act lead private citizens to take on policing tasks, in what would formally be acts of vigilantism (Johnston, 1996). The chapter discusses the blurred boundaries between formal and informal policing actors in times of crisis. Finally, it is argued that resistance against cabin culture is intrinsically linked to resistance against urban influences and power in rural Norway.

Crisis Communication During a Pandemic

Since the 2016 police reform, Norwegian police resources have been centralised in order to facilitate communication and preparedness. Police resources are gathered in district centres and are responsible for vast geographical spaces. "Central" towns closer to police stations may benefit from this arrangement, whereas other less central towns have to wait for police assistance. As the ban was introduced, municipalities around the country requested assistance from the police in guiding arriving cabin owners away or forcing them out of their cabins to go back home. In the days prior to the ban, the police were available to assist at least one of the municipalities in this study in conducting searches, described here by a Mayor:

> We had a very good dialogue with the police all the way. They began patrolling cabin areas the Monday before the ban went into effect, driving around and calling up owners of the cars that were there, asking why they weren't following the advice of the Prime Minster and the municipality administration. There was no ban at that time, so it wasn't sanctioned, but I can imagine people probably felt criminalised already then. [Mayor].

As the ban came into effect and the police were mobilised elsewhere, residents in some towns began their own searches of their own. A resident who clears snow in cabin areas described registering non-residential cars passing by on his hometown roads, and contacting the police and the local municipal administration to warn them that cabin owners were there:
I know people told the police and the municipal administration. That's something we were told to do, to observe activity on the cabins and let them know the cabin number and address. At least I did. And I assume the police followed up on our tips. [Resident]
At this point, the municipality had stopped receiving assistance from the police, and the reports were not being followed up on:

> If many cabin owners had come we would have contacted the police [again], and have them drive up through the cabin areas and call the owners of the cars. But we did nothing with the reports we got from our residents … We had residents acting like police officers without a police badge. [Mayor]

At the same time, however, the local administration was publically stating that they would track and fine cabin owners breaching the ban. Knowing that the police would not assist, local residents described interpreting the statements of the mayor as a rallying call for action. Some residents blocked roads leading up to cabin areas by refusing to clear the snow, others threaten to do so:

> It's fascinating to think that we almost had a civil war in Norway because of a cabin ban … The official administration here said so, they said they were going to show up with snow dumpers and bulldozers and physically block access to the cabin areas. [Cabin owner]

Other residents followed cars with non-local registration plates in order to report them back to the administration and the police. When that proved ineffective, as no official authority visibly followed up on the report, one resident admitted to actively going into cabin areas to confront the people who were there:

> I told them "I don't think this is right. You're not allowed to be here and you shouldn't be here. It would be very nice for me if you would respect that, because this is a crime, after all". [Resident]

Others called cabin owners to let them know they were being observed. One cabin owner recounted being called by someone responsible for clearing snow in her area:

> He is married to a politician, and he said, "I can see that you're there right now". He could look right across to our cabin, so he sees the indoor lights, at least. "Yes, I've been here for two days and I'm not going home", I said. "Have you thought about what that means?" he asked, "because we'll just get the army to come and get you" … I've never felt as harassed ever before in my life. It was bullying, that's what it was. [Cabin owner]

Cabin owners were following press briefings and public statements released by the local government, but they also found information through unofficial sources. It was unclear to them if this was the view of the local government, or the private views of people in positions of power. It was also unclear how they were to interpret that sort of information. For instance, one cabin owner had befriended the mayor's partner on Facebook, and read their discussions about the cabin situations on the partner's profile page. This is information that would only be visible to Facebook friends of the partner, i.e. in a blurred area between public and private, member v. non-member spheres. The mayor's partner reposted public statement from the mayor's open Facebook page and added comments of their own, which cabin owners interpreted as additional indirect statements by the mayor and the local government, published through the accounts of private persons so as not to seem like the mayor was directly harassing cabin owners:

> It felt like we were being harassed. The mayor's partner, we're friends on Facebook. She posted something of his, which was pretty rough. You could *feel* that someone had an agenda there, someone was mobilising for something. It was as if they were afraid of cabin owners. [Cabin owner]

Another cabin owner was following the Facebook accounts of local politicians, and read posts describing cabin owners and cabin culture as the *real* virus. Unlike the other cabin owners contributing to this study, this particular cabin owner responded to their discussion in the comments section of a mayor's post:

> One politician here is very anti-cabin owners. [Local] people were responsive to that. It was like "take your fucking COVID-infested Teslas and go home". I tried to be calm when discussing the virus, but people wrote, "go home" and "stop talking, you fucking cunt"'. [Cabin owner].

Crisis communication, while exhibiting well-known attributes of speed and distribution, is inherently local and must be understood in the context of overlapping social roles and the 'reading' by community members. When coming from powerful or well-respected persons, public and digital communication has performative and mobilising effects. It may give the impression that many people agree on the issue at hand. In a pandemic and rapidly developing situation, it can become unclear whether a communication is official or unofficial – from public or private people (see Ceccato and Petersson, 2021; Ceccato,

Solymosi and Müller, 2021). This is particularly challenging in smaller communities, in which the responsibilities, capacities and capabilities of actors are mixed to a greater extent than in cities (Mols and Pridmore, 2019). For instance, as illustrated above, a message from a public official (mayor) reposted by a private person (partner) may appear official to some readers while unofficial to others. A further illustration of this ambiguity is described by a cabin owner who was visited by an administration employee in civil clothing:

> On a Friday morning, I was at the cabin and I saw a small Caddy driving into the area. I could see that it was an administration car. A woman was driving, and she asked me "Are you at your cabin now?" – "Yes, I am, there are only cabins around here, isn't there?" I said. "Yes, you're not welcome here now". [Cabin owner]

This cabin owner described being unsure of whether the woman was on official administrative duty, or representing herself as a private person. Regardless, he stated, the woman must have told others about his whereabouts:

> Then the rumours started spreading. My wife drove up later that day. She got 5-6 text messages on her way up, "you're not wanted here", or maybe it didn't say "wanted", but "don't go to your cabin, go back home". Completely insane, if you ask me … Administration employees going around and checking cabins. [Cabin owner].

In addition to being unsure of who were observing them – the state or private initiatives – the participants were describing what can be argued to be a hybrid digital form of vigilantism, or *digilantism* (Jane, 2017; Trottier, 2017). Some information is only available online, or offline, and to get the full picture they needed to be part of both. The internet and social media platforms can function as digital public squares for debate and humiliation, while also lead to concrete action in offline spaces.

Governing Moral Communities

Curiously, according to participants' descriptions of their own and neighbouring municipalities, there appears to have been more conflict and (need for) informal policing in the municipalities with larger, more luxurious cabins. For instance, some cabin owners in wealthier areas refused to pay the annual cabin tax, which was due right around March 2020. Withholding funds is one of the ways to enforce power. Nation-wide media outlets covered that issue at the time, and when asked what she thought of the media coverage of the conflicts in a neighbouring municipality, one mayor said:

> [Our neighbouring municipalities] have a lot of wealthy winter tourist that also have summer cabins elsewhere. Cabin owners in [town] used their professional titles to threaten the mayor, "I am who I am", having a famous name or a respected profession in society … But people here are more normal. Families and such. Nobody here would say "don't you know who I am?" [Mayor]

Based on descriptions by the members of local government in this study, it is suggested that the conflicts escalated the most in the two municipalities with the wealthiest cabin owners. Participants in these two municipalities described threats between the groups that were not found in the other two municipalities. Rumours that local health services had pre-arranged large numbers of coffins for dead cabin owners, as they would only provide health care services for residents, spread in one municipality. In the other, a cabin owner

published an opinion piece in the local newspaper, saying that the administration, in enforcing the ban, had indirectly doomed cabin owners to death. Some of those desperations were communicated directly:

> We received emails naming people in charge of crisis management, saying "you're forcing me to go back home. I'm at risk [of dying from the virus]. If I die, I'll make sure it says 'thanks [municipality]' on my gravestone". That's where we were at. [Mayor]

Cabin owners called all the mayors in this study during the ban, some were called more than a hundred times every day, pleading for them to make exceptions, or threatening retaliation:

> It was pretty rough. One guy said he would bring weapons and come take us. We received a terror threat to the town hall. People were coming to kill those sitting inside answering calls. [Mayor]

Events such as the ones describe above contributed to legitimising the local mobilisation against visitors. It is also suggested that there is a greater degree of urban influence where the "wealthiest" cabin tourists are. The paper now turns to viewing the responses to the ban in a socio-economic perspective, to discuss rural vigilantism as attempts to (re)gain power lost to centralisation efforts.

A Perceived Urban Threat: Rural and Urban Dynamics at a Pandemic Impasse

In general, those who breached the ban gained little sympathy in the media and from the public. Cabin owners are commonly thought of as arrogant and privileged, yet large parts of the Norwegian population owns or has access to one or more cabins. Owning a cabin can be considered common – 22% of all Norwegian households owns one, and it is estimated that 50% of all Norwegian citizens have access to one or more secondary properties (Larsen and Sti, 2020). What is a particular contemporary issue is the standards of living in many new cabins. Many cabins or other secondary properties constructed today feature multiple bedrooms and bathrooms, spas, saunas and pools, and average about the same size and standard as primary properties (Støa and Manum, 2013). This is a move away from the traditional cabin, which is simple, frugal and close to nature. As one cabin owner stated, they struggle for legitimacy when their "group" identity has such stark contrasts to the "traditional" cabin owner identity:

> In places like this, with Alps and such, many might think that all visitors are a part of an urban elite, as opposed to those who have to walk far up a mountain to get to their cabin. It is as if people here aren't *real* mountaineers. [Cabin owner]

The modern day cabin does not fit with the ideal of the Norwegian sociocultural and protestant history, which valued frugality and simple living. In fact, "the simple life" is a popular narrative constructed around rural life (Ceccato, 2015: 10), and a major reason for why rural areas are favoured getaway places. 'Real' or authentic mountaineers, as the cabin owner states above, is someone who struggles up a mountain to get to a small cabin without electricity or running water. Only after completing that journey are they deserving of the comfort which cabin life entails. The modern day cabin, accessible via roads and built using imported labour, stands in stark contrast.

It appeared, as suggested by several participants, that the wealthier the cabin owners, the more tension there was between residents and visitors within a municipality. It can be argued that the isolated nature of cabins serve precisely the purpose of allowing for displays of wealth in controlled, isolated contexts. But for understanding the dynamics at play, it is important to acknowledge that cabin owners go to rural areas on holiday, which are places in which residents live and work. The groups will meet in transactional settings; selling and buying goods at stores and local markets, or as receivers and providers of services particular to the tourism industry, fishing, skiing, or when residents provide labour for cabin renovation. Services are provided by one group, for the leisure of the other. This transactional nature renders the premise for interaction uneven. The premise then changed dramatically when the government prohibited urban cabin owners from visiting rural areas. Financial flows between the groups came to a halt, and the Emergency bill rendered cabin culture unwanted legally, not only socially. It can be argued that the cabin ban brought further legitimacy to pre-existing sociopolitical polarisations in shared spaces in rural Norway. Protecting the local community through acts of vigilantism when the state (police and local government) were unresponsive can be understood as a reification of these political tensions.

Socioeconomic uncertainty, stress, fears for loss of land and threats to resources contribute to feelings of inferiority relative to urban (national) counterparts. In Nordic literature, this is theorised as a subaltern experience (Skogen and Krange, 2020: 551). However, as this study shows, investigating how rural and urban populations interact in shared spaces can provide a basis for understanding more concretely what the subaltern experience consists of – if it exists at all, and if so, what the dynamics of it is. This study suggests that it is not just a subaltern and inferior experience, but a mobilisation to claim autochthon superiority in a given geographical space, or home.

Concluding Notes: Towards a Rural Criminology of Vigilantism

In response to a perceived inadequately robust response from local governments, residents in some rural towns attempted to obstruct cabin owners' access by refusing to remove snow from local roads, and by following, reporting, threatening or confronting visitors virtually and physically. Local politicians also encouraged or personally took part in that mobilisation. When citizens mobilise against external threats to local resources, and when they go beyond the official capacities of local law enforcement, it is often times conceptualised under the umbrella of vigilantism. In criminological literature about the characteristics of legitimate vigilantism, a line is drawn between what is state and what is not: i.e. that vigilante formations must be a private initiative (Johnston, 1996). However, this knowledge draws primarily on research in the urban and Anglo-American contexts. Less is known about the dynamics of rural vigilantism in the Nordics. This study contributes to bridging that gap by providing insights of how the COVID-19 pandemic gave way to a situation in which vigilantism appeared in a new context.

During the pandemic, urban residents in Norway turned to rural areas for protection – areas in which resources for protection were scarce prior to the pandemic. Resource scarcity is oftentimes cause for the type of social unrest and informal policing that vigilante scholarship covers. Yet this paper shows that clear distinctions between private and public initiatives is particularly challenging to make in a rural and pandemic context. They have become '"twilight institutions", where it becomes difficult to distinguish unequivocally between what is state and what is not' (Buur and Jensen, 2004: 144).

Furthermore, this case shows that vigilante formations are not always organised. People can be part of one without realising. Others can call for one without being aware of the effect that has on others. What is clear is that residents in rural areas experienced a very sudden need for some sort of policing. With the actual police far away or unable to assist because they were called to go elsewhere, residents took it upon themselves to act as police in their hometowns. Previous centralisation of law enforcement has left a space in rural areas which police are less available. The pandemic furthered this pre-existing gap of availability, as the government mobilised the police force, emergency units and branches of the military for other purposes. Residents, who did not appear surprised to hold such responsibilities, given that the police reform had left those duties unattended in their local communities prior to the pandemic, protected their communities from the virus by taking on "real" policing duties.

Findings from this study point to a need for a localised and available police, or *a similar body* which residents can turn to for protection in times of need. It is also important that this body has knowledge of local processes and dynamics, for instance with regards to ongoing sociocultural disputes. The centralisation effort undertaken by the Norwegian police over the last decade, in which police resources have been moved to regional centres, leaves a space that is filled by private citizens in some communities. This tells us that local residents will mobilise to embody some form of police structure if there is a perceived threat against their community. Whether these challenges can be solved on an economic level, for instance by deciding caps on cabin construction or monitoring financial flows generated by tourism v. local export, should be a policy priority. Still, what is most evident today, as described by the participants in this study, is the need for establishing some form of community police or mediating body that has mandate and is equipped to manage ongoing and urgent situations, in the (partial) absence of formal police.

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